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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000624

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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE: 701 H1N1 CASES; QUARANTINE MEASURES EASE

REF: A) SINGAPORE 581; B) SINGAPORE 603

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The number of confirmed H1N1 cases in Singapore has risen rapidly to more than 700, spurring the GOS to continue its move away from strict containment measures toward mitigating the effects of local transmission of the virus. However, during this transition phase there are mixed signals coming from various parts of the GOS, potentially causing confusion among the public. The Ministry of Health (MOH) no longer explicitly advises against unnecessary travel to countries with community spread of H1N1 and will not issue home quarantine orders for close contacts of confirmed cases. However, the Ministry of Education has been closing schools where cases of H1N1 have been detected. Large-scale public events have been canceled and the GOS has advised companies that they can require otherwise well employees to stay home after travel to countries with sustained community transmission of H1N1 like the United States. End Summary.

H1N1 Numbers Grow, but Quarantine Orders Drop

2. (SBU) The rate of H1N1 infection in Singapore has ballooned from about 77 cases on June 18, when the Ministry of Health (MOH) first detected local transmission of the virus (Ref A), to more than 700 cases as of June 30. MOH will stop issuing quarantine orders for close contacts of confirmed cases but MOH may still quarantine confirmed H1N1 cases, an MOH official told Econoff July 1. MOH lifted its advisories against unnecessary travel to countries with sustained local transmission of H1N1 and now includes Singapore, along with the United States, UK, Australia and others, in a list of 17 countries with community spread of H1N1 that are also likely to be exporting H1N1 infection (Ref B).

3. (SBU) The GOS is moving gradually from containment policies to mitigation measures and is attempting to be as transparent as possible during the transition, MFA Consular Officer Alvin Low told Econoff June 30. There are no longer any American citizens in home quarantine or at any of Singapore's quarantine centers, although there are at least two American-citizen patients with H1N1 being treated at local hospitals. The Embassy Consular Section has noted a dramatic reduction in the number of notifications from MFA regarding the quarantine of American citizens, suggesting that quarantining of "close contacts" arriving by air to Singapore has been reduced as stated by MOH.

Mixed Signals from the GOS and Private Sector

14. (U) MOH has revised its website daily to keep the public informed of the latest situation in Singapore and provide links to information such as the location of community Pandemic Preparedness Clinics, which have been established across the island. MOH guidance for the public primarily recommends good hygiene and careful monitoring for signs of flu-like illness, but otherwise encourages Singaporeans to go about their daily routines.

15. (SBU) However, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has closed individual schools and is issuing leave-of-absence orders for students and teachers returning from travel to countries with sustained community transmission (Ref B). On June 29, press reported that MOE quarantined 500 students and 20 teachers at a local boarding school after two H1N1 cases were confirmed there. At the same time, Singapore is hosting the Asian Youth Games (AYG) from June 29 through July 7, which involves young athletes from around Asia, but some (AYG) events have been rescheduled when athletes were found to have been in close contact with confirmed H1N1 cases. Other large-scale public gatherings, including an outdoor, nighttime in-line skating event scheduled for July 25, have been canceled out of fear of the spread of H1N1.

16. (SBU) The Ministry of Manpower, National Trades Union Congress, Singapore Business Federation and Singapore National Employers Federation issued a joint advisory on June 26 that recommended different treatment for employees that have traveled to affected countries for work versus those that had traveled to affected countries voluntarily (e.g., for holiday). The advisory stated that employers could require employees with recent voluntary travel to affected countries to stay home from work and use their annual leave to cover the absence, but the advisory stated that employers should

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continue to pay employees and accommodate leaves of absence if the employee traveled to an affected country for work. Such differentiations could penalize people who voluntarily travel to countries like the United States and further discourage travel there.

17. (SBU) MFA's Low said that it is not the GOS's responsibility to dictate to companies and schools how they respond to the H1N1 outbreak. Individuals have a social responsibility to help control the spread of H1N1 by voluntarily practicing social distancing if they have traveled to countries that have been exporting cases of H1N1, he said. Low disagreed that the differing guidance among GOS agencies could create confusion among the public and misinterpretations of MOH guidance. He also disagreed that company policies requiring otherwise well people to take annual leave upon returning from voluntary travel to an affected country could amount to an implied prohibition against travel, even as MOH has lifted the explicit travel advisories.

SHIELDS